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NORTH CHICAGO -- The county's homeless shelter system is asking for help from private donors to cover a \$150,000 budget shortfall by the end of June.

PADS Crisis Services needs to raise a total of \$360,000 by Sept. 1.

Executive Director Cathy Curran said the same economic woes that devastate the lives of PADS clients are also undermining the agency that is struggling to help them.

"Our clients are under terrible pressure due to economic conditions," Curran told a group of elected officials at a news conference Tuesday at PADS headquarters on the VA campus in North Chicago. "Because of big budget shortfalls -- both federal and state -- they're experiencing even greater hardships."

Foreclosures, job losses and homelessness among veterans have swelled PADS' numbers.

From June 2007 through May, the agency saw a 17 percent increase in clients, a 10 percent increase in single adults, a 41 percent increase in adult family members and a 48 percent increase in children. Sixty-three percent of new clients are homeless, and 91 percent have no income.

"Five days a week we have overflow," said Cedric Lee, PADS director of community outreach. "That means increased staff and transportation costs."

PADS' fuel costs have doubled to more than \$50,000 this year, said Robert Reusch, past president of the PADS board of directors. While private funding is up by 5 percent, public funding is down slightly and remains uncertain as the agency waits to see how the proposed

state budget might be slashed.

Reusch called homelessness an "affliction."

"Our goal is to provide not just housing but a way to independence," Reusch said. "We have very few chronic homeless -- a couple hundred. But many more need short-term help."

The agency operates year-round shelters for a limited number of families and a handful of those with mental illness as well as elderly men. But for most of its clients, overnight shelter is strictly a fall-winter proposition. Every May 1, the people who were collected by the big blue PADS bus and spent nights on a church floor must go out and find their own cot, couch or corner.

Peter Lamantia of Waukegan, 18, slept outside a train station for two months until PADS reopened for its 20th season last Oct. 1. But while he had to sleep on concrete, Lamantia is grateful for the daily use of the agency's resource center.

"They let me use their address," said Lamantia, who was "kicked out" by his parents on the night before his 18th birthday. "I came here to eat, do my laundry and just hang out."

PADS connected Lamantia with the job training program Youth Build Lake County. He now shares an apartment and will graduate in July with a universal certification in HVAC.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, stressed the importance of "making sure PADS stays open." He said he is "proud" the VA is home to the homeless, but stressed that "we need to do more."

State, county and municipal elected officials also spoke in support of PADS.

"We have an obligation to care for the poor," said state Rep. Eddie Washington, D-Waukegan, who said the growing problem of homelessness calls for a "minuteman-type" response.

State Sen. Susan Garrett, D-Lake Forest, called homelessness in Lake County "a sticky issue."

"People think we don't have a problem because we contain it and we don't talk about it," Garrett said. "But it is an issue that will continue to plague us."

PADS CONNECTION

PADS, which provided nearly 25,000 nights of emergency shelter during the past year in Lake County, can be reached at (847) 689-4357 or by visiting <http://www.lakecountypads.org/>.

This article was edited to comply with Franking Commission guidelines.